

Statement of Introduction
Safe Passage to School Expansion Act of 2021
Councilmember Christina Henderson
February 4, 2021

Today, along with Councilmembers Mary Cheh, Brianne Nadeau, Janeese Lewis George, Brooke Pinto, and Robert C. White, Jr., I am introducing the *Safe Passage to School Expansion Act of 2021*. This measure was previously offered as [B23-393](#) in Council Period 23 by Councilmember David Grosso. I am re-introducing this important legislation to ensure that we refocus our attention on the safety risks students face traveling to school as they return to in-person instruction in the midst of a gun violence epidemic.

In recent years, at least two independent entities have taken a deep dive into gunshot data from the ShotSpotter system and cross-referenced it with proximity to schools. In 2014, the Urban Institute found that 54% of the District's schools – both traditional and charter – had been within 1,000 feet of gunfire, and 30% had gunfire within 500 feet of the building. Schools experienced a total of 249 gunfire incidents that year, often requiring lockdowns.

Then, after the 2016-2017 school year, the Guns & America project found that at least 84 school campuses in the District experienced one or more gunshots within 1,000 feet of their campus. Five D.C. schools, all with elementary-aged students, experienced at least 10 shootings that year. And 82% of these shootings occurred at schools in the eastern end of the District of Columbia.

We have only seen the rates of gun violence in the city increase since then, with homicides hitting a 15-year high in 2020. Tragically, at least nine of the city's 198 homicide victims in 2020 were under the age of 18.

This data confirms heartbreaking stories we've heard from young people directly. At a hearing on the prior version of this bill in 2019, numerous brave students came forward to share their terrifying experiences with violence while traveling to or from school. For example, a then-12th grader at Maya Angelou Public Charter School in Ward 7 testified:

My friend and I stayed at school late that day to help my teacher clean up his classroom. When we left, we went to my house to drop my things off. Then I walk[ed] her home since it was dark outside. We ... talked in front of her building for a few minutes. A man in a ski mask came around the corner and got into an altercation with another boy near where we were standing. Shots were fired, and I ended up on the ground—shot in the leg. The bullet went through one leg and landed in the other. ... I missed so much school that I was behind a year and missed graduating last year with my friends. I still have pain and difficulty with my leg. I suffer from anxiety and have trust issues.

I'm involved [in] after-school activities, and think it is important to make sure students are safe not just until 7:00pm ... Our sports activities, tutoring programs and other activities don't end until after 7pm ... [T]he scariest part for me and my friends is thinking about getting home safely—especially now when it gets dark so early. There are many ways to help us get back and forth to school safely that include ... [s]huttles that can transport us to safe Metro Stations and Bus stops [and] security on the bus routes w[h]ere there has been a lot of violence.

We have to redouble our efforts to prevent this kind of violence as students return to school post-pandemic. The *Safe Passage to School Expansion Act of 2021* would elevate, expand and centralize various safe passage programs being led by the Deputy Mayor for Education, the Office of the Attorney General, the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement, and the Office of the Student Advocate, among others. The bill would create a dedicated Office of Safe Passage reporting to the Mayor tasked with coordinating safe passage efforts across agencies, developing city-wide and ward-specific strategies for student safety, administering grants to community-based organizations implementing safe passage plans and hiring personnel to monitor routes in high-priority areas. It also calls for increased use of shuttles for student transportation to Metro stations in areas facing the greatest safety challenges.

This issue takes on renewed importance as our students return to in-person learning, and I believe we need continuous and sustained safe passage programming. I look forward to working with my Council colleagues and other stakeholders to advance and pass this measure in time for the 2021-2022 school year.